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AUTHOR Jacobs, George M.
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ABSTRACT

This paper is divided into three parts. The first explains concepts in the design of group activities that encourage learner cooperation, and ways in which they differ. Activities are distinguished by: (1) whether or not they involve learner time for planning language use before interaction; (2) whether they have one predetermined correct answer or set of answers or have no single answer or set; and (3) whether group members need to share information, in either one-way or two-way exchanges, to complete the activity. Following this, five sample activities are described as they appear in a teaching guide, then according to the three characteristics noted above. Suggestions are made for adapting the activity. The third part presents two activities and challenges the audience to analyze and adapt them similarly. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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ADAPTING GROUP ACTIVITIES TO ENCOURAGE COOPERATION

Demonstration presented at the
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George M Jacobs, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre,
RELC Building, Rm. 608, 30 Orange Grove Road, Singapore 1025, Tel: (65)737-9044,
ext. 608; Fax: (65)734-2753;
E-mail: gmjacobs@technet.sg

This demonstration has three parts. Part I is a brief introduction to some ways in which group activities differ. Part II, consists of a demonstration of how group activities can be adapted according to these differences. In Part III, the participants will be asked to demonstrate their understanding of and views on concepts presented in Parts I and II by adapting some group activities.

PART I - SOME WAYS IN WHICH GROUP ACTIVITIES DIFFER

Group activities are being used more frequently in English Language Teaching (ELT). The use of groups in ELT has been recommended for many reasons (Doff, 1988; Holt, 1993; Long and Porter, 1985). These include greater opportunity for learners to use the language, increased motivation, enhanced learner autonomy, lower anxiety, more comprehensible input, wider variety of language use, and greater enjoyment.

While groups are widely believed to be an important part of effective ELT practice, using groups is a complex matter, more complex than is a teacher-fronted instructional format. Scholars (e.g., Long, 1990; Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993) have studied what occurs as groups of students participate in group language learning activities. They found that group activities vary in many ways and that these ways effect the language that students use. These differences in language use may, in turn, effect the value of a particular type of group activity. Teachers need to understand these differences in order to implement group activities in ways that best fit their own educational beliefs and their students' needs.

Concepts in the Design of Group Activities

Many different views exist as to how to design group activities. These differences derive from several sources, including the goals to be achieved via groups and the research traditions of those who construct the activities. For example, Long (1990) focuses on how group activities can promote second language acquisition and refers to research carried out to investigate this.

Three concepts that warrant attention in designing group activities (Long, 1990) are: (1) whether an activity provides time for learners to plan the language they will speak or write; (2) whether it is closed or open, and (3) whether students need to exchange information, and, if so, if the exchange one-way or two-way. Each of these concepts is

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explained below.

Planned/Unplanned

Planned activities are those in which students have time to plan the language they are going to use before interacting with other group members. In unplanned activities, learners have no time to prepare before they are to begin interacting with their groupmates. Long suggests that providing opportunities to plan can increase the quantity and quality of the language learners generate.

Closed/Open

Closed activities are ones for which students know there is one predetermined correct answer or small set of answers. An example of a closed activity is one in which learners have to find and correct all the tense errors in a text. Open activities, conversely, are those for which there is no one correct answer. An example of an open activity is one in which learners discuss their views on a controversial issue, e.g., censorship.

Long believes that when learners know there is only one or only a small set of possible correct outcomes, they are more likely to engage in *negotiation of meaning* (actions taken to be sure that communication has been successful) among their group members, because group members try to find the correct answer, rather than settling for any answer, and this tends to stimulate interaction[1]. Negotiation of meaning is seen as important by Long and others because it increases the comprehensibility of the language students hear.

Information Exchange

Information exchange involves whether the activity is constructed so that group members need to share information in order to complete the activity. The concept of information exchange is probably the most complex of the three concepts. If a group is asked to read a text and answer a set of comprehension questions, there is no information exchange required because each group member possesses a copy of the text and a copy of the questions: all the information they need.

In other group activities, information exchange is required because an information gap exists in which not all group members hold the same information. There are two types of information gap activities, one-way and two-way. One-way occurs when one person holds information which other group member(s) do not have[2]. An example of a one-way information exchange is one in which one person has a picture and describes it to their partner who tries to draw it.

A two-way information gap occurs when each group member holds unique information, e.g., jigsaw activities (Coelho, Winer, & Olsen, 1989). An example of a jigsaw

is when each member of a group receives a different part of the text. They need to tell each other the information on their unique piece of the text. Both one-way and two-way involve an information gap in that information must flow between group members in order for the activity to be completed. The difference lies in whether each group member needs to send as well as receive information in order to complete the activity.

The information involved in the gap can be of two kinds: supplied-to-the-learner and supplied-by-the-learner. Supplied-to-the-learner, the type usually discussed in the literature on information gap, is when the gap is created by giving one or more group members information which others do not have. An example could involve giving one person one version of a picture, giving another version of the same picture to their partner, and asking them to identify the differences between the two pictures.

On the other hand, supplied-by-the-learner information gaps are those which exist because of unique information which learners already possess. Asking students to interview each other about their families would be an example of unique information which learners supply from knowledge they already possess. Long (1990), referring only to supplied-to-the-learner gaps, hypothesizes that two-way are better than one-way for promoting negotiation of meaning and that both are better than when no information exchange is required.

Notes of Caution

Two points will be made in this section. First, while we should do our best to develop effective activities, our best-laid plans can sometimes go awry. Second, many definitions exist about key terms in this area of language teaching.

On the first point, this demonstration focuses on what we teachers can do to encourage effective interaction in student groups. However, it should be stressed that sometimes even the best lesson plans and the best teaching materials do not succeed. As Breen (1987: p. 23) cautions, "Learners are capable of playing havoc with even the most carefully designed and much-used activity. ... Perhaps one of the most common experiences we have as teachers is to discover disparity between what our learners seem to derive from a activity and what we intended or hoped the activity would achieve."

In the specific case of group activities, many students may not be accustomed to working in groups and may lack the attitudes and skills necessary for groups to work well together. Thus, we teachers may need to spend time to help students develop these attitudes and skills, because we cannot *make* students cooperate any more than we can make them learn.

Breen (1987: p. 25) advises that we pay attention to how learners reinterpret the activities we ask them to undertake, "The significance of learner reinterpretations of tasks lies in what we can learn from them for the improvement of tasks. ... learner reinterpretations will further reveal the individual language learning process." In this vein, just because an activity does not meet the criteria discussed by Long does not mean that it will not be a valuable activity. Again, in the final analysis, the key lies in how students choose to interact, but the point of this demonstration is to suggest ways that we teachers can do our best to promote interaction which facilitates learning.

On the second point in this section, in language education, as in all fields of learning, multiple meanings are frequently assigned to the same term, and there are often multiple terms for the same meaning. This is certainly the case with the term "task", a term which appears often in the language education literature relevant to the topic of group activities. Nunan (1989: p. 10) has a fairly restrictive definition, "A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form." Long, who is cited above, uses a similar definition.

However, Breen (1987) and others use "task" in a more general sense: "A range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning - from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making" (p. 23). To temporarily sidestep this important debate, the term "task" is generally avoided in this paper.

Further, some of the example activities provided here would not meet Nunan's definition of task. However, these types of activities, which Long would pejoratively call "exercises", are included for two reasons. First, they appear in many language learning materials, and second, the concepts described in this paper (planning, closed\open, information exchange) can be used to adapt these activities as well those of the type Long and Nunan favour. Of course, the argument that Long, Nunan, and others would make is that even if adapted these activities would not efficiently facilitate language learning.

PART II - SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

The activities below come from a coursebook used in another Southeast Asian country. They have been selected to show how we can adapt activities using the three concepts discussed in Part I of this paper. Various cooperative learning techniques (Kagan, 1994) are explained. The cooperative learning literature (e.g., Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993) is rich in suggestions as to how to help students learn from and with one another. The cooperative learning techniques described here are very flexible and can be used in a wide range of situations, not only those discussed in this paper.

Each of the activities below is presented in three sections. First, the activity is reproduced, in italics, exactly as it appears in the coursebook. Second, the activity is described according to the three concepts: planning, closed/open, information exchange. Third, suggestions are made for how the activity could be adapted.

Activity 1

Work in groups. Which of the words below do you immediately associate with the idea of "family"? Take turns to explain the connection that you perceive between the word and the idea.

I *friendship*

dream	*team*
time	*support*
success	*we*

Description

Planning: No

Closed/Open: Open

Information Exchange: No required information exchange of the supplied-to kind because everyone has all the information, but students are requested to "take turns" to tell one another the background for their individual choices. There is a supplied-by gap.

Adaptations

Planning could be added by giving each student three minutes to prepare before groupmates try to guess their words.

Information exchange of the supplied-to kind could be encouraged here by giving each group member some of the words. Students would not know which words their groupmates have. Then, without saying their word, they would explain how it connects with the idea of family. Groupmates would try to guess the word.

Activity 2

In groups, divide the adjectives below into two sets. Explain to the class the basis for your grouping.

confident, generous, tactless, determined, trusting, aggressive, calculating, thrifty, stubborn, assertive, gullible, stingy, shrewd, curious, arrogant, inquisitive, frank, glib, extravagant, eloquent.

Description

Planning: No

Closed/Open: Open

Information Exchange: No required information exchange

Adaptation

One way to encourage **information exchange** would be to use the cooperative learning structure Numbered Heads Together (Kagan, 1994). (See drawing in Appendix from Jacobs, Gan, & Ball, 1995.) The way this works is that every member of the group has a number: 1, 2, 3, or 4. The group has a task, such as Activity #2. They put their heads together to

do the task. Then, the teacher calls a number from 1-4. The group member with that number gives their group's answer and explains how it was obtained.

Information exchange is encouraged because each member needs to be prepared to give their group's answer and the explanation for it. In traditional group activities, it is usually the best student in the group who always gives the group's answer. Here, all group members need to be ready with answers and explanations. Students may feel the need to exchange information in order to make sure everyone is ready.

Planning could also be encouraged by asking each group member to write down their own category system before discussing with their group.

This activity could be made into somewhat more of a **closed** activity by changing some of the adjectives into nouns and asking groups to decide which are nouns and which are adjectives (a task with a right or wrong answer) before grouping the words into two sets (a task without a clear right or wrong answer).

Activity 3

Have you had any of these experiences? Tell your partner about it. You may relate other memorable events in your life.
The time you

* *discovered that you had a talent*
* *realised that you like someone*
* *realised that you had a good friend*
* *realised that someone or something was important to you*
* *realised that someone really cared about you*
* *made a discovery that became the turning point in your life*
* *realised you were able to do something you had been afraid to do*

Description

Planning: No

Closed/Open: Open

Information Exchange: No required information exchange of the supplied-to kind, but there is of the supplied-by kind, although students are not asked to do anything with the information their partner tells them.

Adaptation

Planning could be added to this activity by using the cooperative learning technique Write-Pair-Square (Kagan, 1994). In this technique groups of four form two pairs. Each person first writes individually, in this case the story of their memorable event. Then, they tell the story to their partner, who listens and takes notes. After each person has told their

story to their partner, the two pairs come together, and each person tells their partner's story to the other pair. Write-Pair-Share gives students a chance to plan their language before speaking. Indeed, any activity in which students write first before speaking provides time for planning.

Another advantage of Write-Pair-Share is that it gives students another reason to listen to their partner's stories, i.e., they will be telling it to someone else later. As the activity was originally designed, there is nothing other than the intrinsic interest of the stories (a potentially strong motivator) to encourage the partners to be sure that they bridge the **information gap** in order to understand each other.

This activity could be made into a **closed** one by asking students to describe the experiences of a character in a text they had read as part of classwork. Students would be doing the activity not by talking about their own experiences but by talking about those of the character they had read about. In this way, teachers would be better able to evaluate their descriptions as right or wrong.

Activity 4

The words below are from the passage. In pairs, use a dictionary to look up the adjective or noun form of these words and write them down in their respective columns.

Noun	*Adjective*
wreck	
dent	
callus	
consideration	
ache	
	bulging
	grimy
	pale
	bored

Description

Planning: No

Closed/Open: Closed

Information Exchange: No required information exchange

Adaptation

The activity could be adapted using the cooperative learning technique Pairs Check (Kagan, 1994). (See drawing in Appendix from Jacobs, Gan, & Ball, 1995.) In this

technique, groups of four form two pairs. One member of each pair is the coach. The other member does one item, e.g., in this case, finding the adjective form for the word "wreck", thinking aloud as they look for the answer. The coach checks their answer and the process they used to get it. Pair members reverse roles for the next item. After each pair has done five items, they stop, and the two pairs compare answers. If they disagree, they show each other how they got their different answers. When they agree, they give each other a special group handshake. Then, they repeat the same format to work on the next cluster of words.

Pairs Check does seem to involve **planning**, but it is a kind of planning aloud. The advantage of this lies in the opportunity provided to the partner (and the teacher) to listen in and learn from and/or contribute to the planning.

One way to make the activity a bit more **open** would be to ask groups to think of a situation they have experienced which shows the meaning of each of the words.

Activity 5

a *Work in groups. Each pupil in the group will think of a relative who fits one of these descriptions.*

* *absent-minded*
* *eccentric*
* *fun-loving*
* *enterprising*
* *prankster*
* *accident-prone*
* *afraid of water*
* *brilliant in a way*
* *witty*
* *very fickle/indecisive*

b *Take turns to relate one or two incidents to illustrate your point of view about the person you have in mind.*

c *The rest of the group will try to guess the characteristic you have in mind from your description.*

Description

Planning: Yes, although this could be made more explicit by allocating a given amount of time, e.g., five minutes, for students to prepare their descriptions for Step a.

Closed/Open: Open

Information Exchange: Information exchange required of the supplied-by kind. This seems to be a type of rotating one-way information exchange, because each time someone relates incidents in Step b, it is like a separate one-way activity.

One way to encourage more participation during Step c is, in a group of three, to have one of the listeners be the questioner who first asks a question about the incident(s) and the other listener to be the guesser. Such roles provide learners with a further invitation to try to bridge the **information gap**.

PART III - YOUR TURN TO ADAPT ACTIVITIES

Below are two activities. Please try first to describe them as to whether they are planned/unplanned, closed/open, encouraging/not encouraging of information exchange. Then, try to adapt the activities in regard to these variables.

Activity 6

Imagine you have built a time machine that is not yet perfect. You can only choose one of these time periods to visit:

a Our country in the twenty-second century
b The year when you are twenty-one
c The day you were born
d Your parents' courtship days

Which period would you choose to visit? In groups, tell one another the reasons for your choice.

Description

Planning:

Closed/Open:

Information Exchange:

Activity 7

Of the five sentences below, four have grammar errors. Identify the incorrect sentences and correct the errors.

1. *He is one of my friend who like to play basketball.*
2. *We like eating mangos and to swim.*
3. *She does not likes to dance.*
4. *It is often inconvenience to recycle cans, but it is important.*
5. *Group activities can be a great way to learn about language and about life.*

Description

Planning:

Closed/Open:

CONCLUSION

There are many factors involved in the complicated job of designing effective group activities for language learning. In this demonstration we have looked at three of those factors. The research evidence connecting these factors to language learning is, at this time, more indirect than direct. Thus, the point here has not been to say that all activities should be of one type, e.g., all planned or all closed.

While future reserach may allow a stronger statement to be made, for now it seems reasonable to suggest that learners can benefit from taking part in activities which possess a variety of settings on these factors, e.g., sometimes closed, sometimes open. What the aim of the demonstration has been is to help language teachers and others become more aware of some of the factors which influence the way students work in groups in language class and how these factors can be manipulated, in the hope that such awareness will contribute to future research, materials development, and, most importantly, classroom practice.

Footnotes

[1]However, it is possible that the importance of the distinction between closed and open tasks might be an artefact of the artificiality of most classroom tasks and that students might be equally engaged in open tasks when they are allowed to choose topics or projects themselves.

[2]Please note that there are many other important variables in the design of group activities (see Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993; Kagan, 1994), and that there are different definitions for the terms, e.g., one-way, used in this demonstration.

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